



THE HANDEL INSTITUTE
NEWSLETTER

This issue contains two feature articles and three reviews. Graham Pont presents evidence of Handel's inconsistent notation of musical rhythm and considers its implications, while Thomas McGeary explores one of the more down-to-earth uses of that 'most magnificent & expensfull' diversion, opera. Opera, or more precisely, opera

production is also the subject of the reviews: our reports of *Oreste* and *Alcina* in London, and of *Partenope* in Innsbruck, suggest that there is often (but not always) a wide gap between what producers want to do and what Handel-lovers want to see.

Colin Timms

NOT VAGARIES BUT VARIETIES: HANDEL'S 'INCONSISTENCIES' AUTHENTICATED

In memory of Dene Barnett, musician and logician

It is well known that Handel frequently wrote similar or repeated melodies with varied note-values and other 'inconsistencies' of articulation, accent, ornamentation, dynamics, and so on. Such variations are often found between the instrumental introduction and first vocal entry in his opera and oratorio arias: for example, a figure that is dotted in the introduction may be partly or fully equalized by the voice, or *vice versa* (see Ex. 1). Sometimes, melodically related figures appear in several different rhythms, giving parallel, repeated or imitative passages an alarming appearance of randomness.¹

Scholars, editors and performers have long regarded these differences as mistakes resulting from casual notation or careless haste in writing, and, assuming Handel's 'inconsistencies' to be musically insignificant, have replaced them with their own uniform or more regular passages.²

This assumption has been put to the test by a computer-aided analysis of autograph instrumental and vocal incipits in 1043 arias from Handel's operas and oratorios, a systematic sample representing about 55% of his output in these genres. The survey covers arias, including those accompanied by continuo alone, in which the melody is

announced in an instrumental introduction and repeated by the singer, but excludes those in which the voice precedes the first instrumental entry.

The survey reveals, among other things, that the voice equalizes dotted rhythms of a melodically similar instrumental introduction in about 17% of the arias examined, whereas the reverse variation, in which the voice adds dots to the equal notes of the introduction, occurs in about 4% of the same sample. The difference in the frequency of these kinds of variation immediately suggests that their occurrence is not random. The adding of dots to pairs of crotchets, quavers or semiquavers occurs 44 times in 38 of the arias surveyed, whereas the dropping of dots by the voice is found in 181 arias (350 instances). If Handel had been generally unreliable in matching his vocal and instrumental rhythms, one would have expected to find more uniform evidence of this tendency in both kinds of variation: the marked difference in the levels of added and dropped dots is *prima facie* evidence that the differences of notation are not accidental.

This conclusion is strikingly confirmed by another test performed on the same data. Graph I was generated from

1 Cf. Winton Dean, *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques* (London, 1959), p. 565, note 1, on the exceptionally complicated dotted and equal figures in the aria 'As with rosy steps the morn' (*Theodora*).

2 The varied rhythms referred to in note 1 are consistently equalized in the Watkins Shaw edition of *Theodora* (Novello, 1984). On the history of

regularization since the eighteenth century, see 'A Revolution in the Science and Practice of Music', *Musicology*, v (1979), pp. 1-66, especially pp. 18ff. Twenty years later I see no need to alter anything of substance in this paper except the manually derived figures for Handel (Appendix I, p. 36), which are now superseded by more accurate results obtained by computer analysis.



Ex. 1: the beginning of the duet 'Deh perdona, o dolce bene' from *Flauto* (HWV 16: 26) in Handel's autograph (RM 20. b. 1, f. 82, by permission of the British Library). The dotted semiquavers of the instrumental introduction are consistently equalized in the vocal entries.

the encoded data of the 181 arias in which the melody of the vocal entry matches the preceding instrumental introduction for at least a bar and some or all of the dotted crotchets, quavers or semiquavers in the introduction are equalized in the corresponding vocal part. It shows that for slower arias in common time the levels of frequency are as high as 50%, whereas for arias in 6/8 time this kind of variation does not appear at all in the tempo range from *largo* to *andante*, being found only in about 15% of the *allegro*

numbers. The graph thus suggests that the dropping of dots by the voice is far from random – that Handel deliberately introduced these rhythmic variations between the instrumental and vocal versions of his melodies – and challenges long-accepted but rarely defended assumptions concerning the accuracy of the composer's musical notation and his reliability as a scribe.³

This finding is strengthened in turn by the fact that nearly all of the rhythmic 'inconsistencies' are exactly reproduced in Handel's conducting

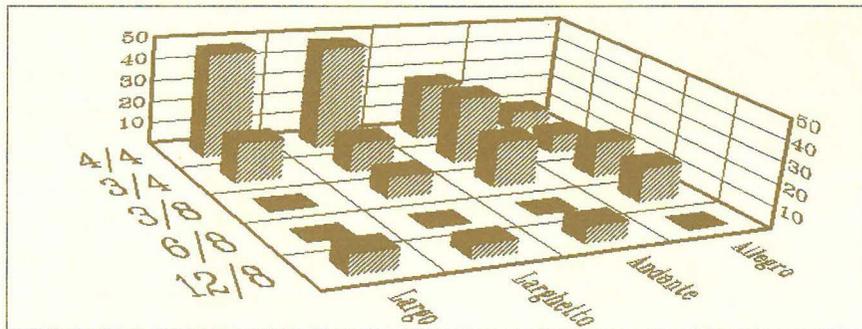
scores, in contemporary printed editions of his works (including imprints said to have been corrected by the composer) and in nearly all subsequent editions until the 1950s. In all sources the frequency of these small but significant variations is well above the level of indisputable slips of the pen. In the same sample, my colleague Jennifer Nevile identified 53 autograph arias exhibiting altogether 93 instances of apparently imperfect note-values.⁴ The percentage of autograph incipits with over-full or incomplete bars is just over 4% of the sample. Although some small allowance must be made for uncertainties arising from Handel's handwriting or the quality of microfilms used in this survey, the evidence suggests that his note-values are occasionally imperfect, but not very often.

The survey also shows that the differences in note-lengths at the beginnings of Handel's arias are part of a consistent pattern of variation. Taking all forms of melodic variation together (including note-length and proportion, rhythm, dynamics, accent, articulation and ornamentation), the notation of the vocal entries in Handel's arias differs significantly from that of the instrumental introductions in just over 71% of the sample: Table I demonstrates that in

Table I (opposite)

Instrumental/Vocal Incipits of Arias in Handel's Operas and Oratorios: Numbers and Percentages of Arias showing Variation

This Table divides the identical or similar instrumental/vocal incipits in each work into two categories – 'varied' (i.e., differently notated) and 'not varied' (identically notated) – and gives the number and percentage of arias in each category. The forms of variation are classified as 'adding of dots', 'dropping of dots', 'altered beginning of notes', 'altered ending of notes', 'articulation', 'ornamentation', 'passing grace note', 'passing full note', and 'miscellaneous rhythmic variation'.



Graph I: Instrumental/Vocal Incipits of Arias in Handel's Operas and Oratorios: Percentage of Arias with Dropped Dots in each Tempo/Metre Group

3 Thus Mendelssohn, the first editor explicitly to reject regularization of Handel's score, is vindicated. Cf. F. Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, *Goethe and Mendelssohn (1821-1831)*, trans. M. E. von Glehn, 2nd edn (London, 1874), p. 183.

4 I am deeply indebted to Dr Nevile (School of English, University of New South Wales), who

undertook the Herculean task of encoding the data from the original sources (with generous technical support from Tim Wooller) and tabulating the results. I also thank: Dr Nigel Nettheim (School of Music, University of New South Wales), for the computation, statistical analysis and graphic display of the results, which were first presented in his

paper 'A Statistical Analysis of Notated Variants in the Autographs of Handel's Operas and Oratorios', read to the Musicological Society of Australia, Sydney Chapter, on 2 July 1988; and Alan Stein, for his comments and valuable suggestions for further statistical analysis. The project was funded by the Australia Research Council.



WORK	NUMBER			PERCENTAGE		
	Varied	Unvaried	Total	Varied	Unvaried	Total
Rodrigo	7	3	10	70.0	30.0	100
Agrippina	10	4	14	71.4	28.6	100
La resurrezione	6	2	8	75.0	25.0	100
Aci, Galatea e Polifemo	2	3	5	40.0	60.0	100
Rinaldo	3	3	6	50.0	50.0	100
Il pastor fido	3	2	5	60.0	40.0	100
Teseo	1	2	3	33.3	66.7	100
Silla	2	2	4	50.0	50.0	100
Ode for ... Queen Anne	6	2	8	75.0	25.0	100
Acis and Galatea	5	1	6	83.3	16.7	100
Esther	7	0	7	100.0	0.0	100
Radamisto	14	11	25	56.0	44.0	100
Muzio Scevola	3	2	5	60.0	40.0	100
Floridante	3	5	8	37.5	62.5	100
Ottone	11	7	18	61.1	38.9	100
Flavio	11	4	15	73.3	26.7	100
Giulio Cesare	27	6	33	81.8	18.2	100
Tamerlano	11	12	23	47.8	52.2	100
Rodelinda	19	6	25	76.0	24.0	100
Scipione	16	4	20	80.0	20.0	100
Alessandro	12	7	19	63.2	36.8	100
Riccardo primo	14	6	20	70.0	30.0	100
Siroe	15	3	18	83.3	16.7	100
Tolomeo	17	3	20	85.0	15.0	100
Lotario	19	3	22	86.4	13.6	100
Partenope	18	14	32	56.3	43.7	100
Poro	13	4	17	76.5	23.5	100
Ezio	11	6	17	64.7	35.3	100
Sosarme	15	3	18	83.3	16.7	100
Orlando	12	7	19	63.2	36.8	100
Arianna	11	9	20	55.0	45.0	100
Deborah	14	3	17	82.4	17.6	100
Athalia	12	4	16	75.0	25.0	100
Ariodante	9	13	22	40.9	59.1	100
Alcina	16	7	23	69.6	30.4	100
Atalanta	10	2	12	83.3	16.7	100
Arminio	10	6	16	62.5	37.5	100
Giustino	19	2	21	90.5	9.5	100
Alexander's Feast	11	0	11	100.0	0.0	100
Berenice	11	7	18	61.1	38.9	100
Faramondo	5	6	11	45.5	54.5	100
Serse	9	9	18	50.0	50.0	100
Il trionfo del Tempo	7	4	11	63.6	36.4	100
Saul	18	3	21	85.7	14.3	100
Israel in Egypt	2	1	3	66.7	33.3	100
Ode for St Cecilia's Day	3	1	4	75.0	25.0	100
Imeneo	12	7	19	63.2	36.8	100
Deidamia	16	9	25	64.0	36.0	100
L'Allegro ed il Penseroso	13	6	19	68.4	31.6	100
Messiah	12	7	19	63.2	36.8	100
Samson	20	6	26	76.9	23.1	100
Joseph	12	3	15	80.0	20.0	100
Semele	14	7	21	66.7	33.3	100
Hercules	17	5	22	77.3	22.7	100
Belshazzar	11	2	13	84.6	15.4	100
Occasional Oratorio	12	4	16	75.0	25.0	100
Judas Maccabaeus	18	3	21	85.7	14.3	100
Joshua	12	6	18	66.7	33.3	100
Alexander Balus	18	0	18	100.0	0.0	100
Alceste	4	3	7	57.1	42.9	100
Susanna	18	6	24	75.0	25.0	100
Solomon	17	2	19	89.5	10.5	100
Theodora	15	6	21	71.4	28.6	100
The Choice of Hercules	6	3	9	66.7	33.3	100
Jephtha	14	3	17	82.4	17.6	100
Totals / Averages	741	302	1043	71.0	29.0	100



his notation of inconsistencies between melodically related incipits Handel was remarkably consistent throughout his long career.

There can be little doubt, then, that Handel's notation consistently favours rhythmic variety rather than uniformity. What were once seen as scribal vagaries must now nearly all be accepted as authentic variations. It should also be obvious that these deliberate variations must not be confused, as they have for so long been, with Handel's occasional scribal errors: they belong to different categories and different orders of magnitude.

The composer's preference for notational variety has profound implications for editors and performers of his music. There is no contemporary evidence that his works were meant to be notated or performed in a uniform manner, or that rhythmic standardization is always desirable or correct. His notation suggests that variety was at the very least an option. The time has come for a radical reassessment of editorial procedures and performance practices, not only in Handel's music but also in that of other composers who shared a similar aesthetic.

Graham Pont

HEIDEGGER, HANDEL, OPERA, AND F—TING

June 1738 was not a favourable month for lovers of Italian opera in London. On 24 May 1738 John Jacob Heidegger, manager of the King's Theatre in the Haymarket, had announced that he was collecting subscriptions for the following season. He stated that he needed to garner two hundred subscriptions at 20 guineas each by 5 June (the day

before the last performance in the current season). Otherwise, he would cancel the 1738/39 season.¹ In the event, Heidegger did not gather enough subscriptions. On 17 June Signora Strada del Po, one of the planned singers, left London, and on 26 July Heidegger announced the cancellation of the season and the refund of subscriptions that he had received.²

At the end of June, when it was no doubt widely known in London that next year's opera season had been cancelled, the *Literary Courier of Grub-street* (no. 26, June 29, 1738) printed a facetious letter, dated 10 June, from 'Philo-F—t' of 'Blowbladder-street'. This letter apparently was unknown to Deutsch, presumably because no copy of this issue of the *Literary Courier* is known in the British Isles. Philo-F—t's letter, to Dr Ephraim Quibus, Philomath, the ostensible editor of the *Literary Courier*, is outwardly a sympathetic attempt to aid Heidegger after the failed subscription by offering him advice on how better to promote opera.

Philo-F—t, who says he has been a constant customer of operas and masquerades, presents himself as a volunteer advocate on behalf of Heidegger, who is too modest and bashful for his own good. Polite society is much indebted, he continues, to Heidegger's 'invention and indefatigable labour':

How heavily would the burden of liesure [sic] and idleness sit upon our *Beau Monde* during the dull winter season, if this artist did not contrive to ease the *sensible* creatures, by his *rational* entertainments of *Operas*, *Oratorio*'s,

Ridotto's, and dear *Masquerades*? How intomb'd in the hipp' [hypochondria³] and vapours; how gross their ideas of the polite diversion of *France* and *Italy*, if this generous *Swiss* virtuoso did not design to lay out his whole flock of invention in their service!

Of course, this exaggerated praise of Heidegger's entertainments is thinly veiled sarcasm.

Philo-F—t now turns to the recent failure of the opera subscription. He contrasts Heidegger's neglect and the public's ingratitude with the recent celebration of Handel, whose statue had been erected in Vauxhall Gardens the previous month:⁴

And yet, who would think it, Mr. Quibus, this benefactor to the public meets with nothing but ingratitude from that very public. He finds himself neglected, forgot, whilst he sees universal homage paid to, and even a statue erected in honour of *one* [Handel], who till of late thought it his chiefest glory to hold the first rank amongst his domestics.

After mentioning Heidegger's announcement soliciting subscriptions (reprinted at the foot of the column), Philo-F—t states that his purpose is to provide 'a few, poignant savoury puffs' to show what the '*over-modest professor* [Heidegger] might have urged in favour of his laudable undertaking'.

One argument that Heidegger might have used was economic. 'Circulation', Philo-F—t asserts, 'is the very essence of trade', and Heidegger's entertainments provide employment for 'the lazy and idle part' of the community. Increase in its inhabitants is a principal source of a kingdom's power and wealth, and Heidegger has brought

1 Notice (dated 23 May) printed in the *London Daily Post*, 24 May 1738 (O. E. Deutsch, *Handel: A Documentary Biography* (London, 1955), 460-61) and in the *Daily Advertiser* of 25 May; reprinted (from the latter) in the *Literary Courier of Grub-street*, 29 June.

2 Notice (dated 25 July) printed in the *London Daily Post*, 26 July 1738 (Deutsch, *op. cit.*, 464-5).

3 At the time, melancholy or a morbid depression of

the spirits (*Oxford English Dictionary*, vii. 552). 'Vapours': an obsolete medical term for emanations from the internal organs or from substances in the body (*OED*, xix. 435, 4. b).

4 Terence Hodgkinson, *Handel at Vauxhall. Victoria and Albert Museum Bulletin Reprints*, no. 1 (1969) [expanded reprint from the *Bulletin of the Victoria and Albert Museum*, i/4 (1965), 1-13], and Thomas McGeary, 'Handel at Vauxhall', *The Handel Institute*

Newsletter, ix/1 (Spring 1998). On 28 March 1738 Heidegger had allowed Handel a benefit concert at the Haymarket Theatre, probably as part of the package offered to obtain the composer's services for the opera company he was operating there; see Donald Burrows, 'Handel's 1738 *Oratorio*: A Benefit Pasticcio', in *Georg Friedrich Händel - Ein Lebensinhalt: Gedenkschrift für Bernd Baselt (1934-1993)* (Halle a. d. Saale: Händel-Haus, 1995), 11-38.



over to Britain singers and musicians from France, Germany, and Italy. Philo-F—t's elaboration of this point, though, yields to irony and sarcasm about the extravagant sums the English squandered on the 'starv'd refuse of the Continent':

Did not he [Heidegger] detain *Senesino* here till he had emptied half the pockets of taste and distinction in town, and till he was past his labour? Did not he prevent the flight of the beloved *Farrinelli*, till he had swept up the gleanings of *Senesino's* harvest, and became good for nothing? Ungrateful generation! And does not he, as he sweeps away the gorg'd leeches, bring you a constant fresh supply of sharp, nimble, hungry ones in their room, to ease you with the greater speed of the incumbering redundancy of your shining-dross? but obligations are lost upon the ungrateful.

Opera is also beneficial because it encourages the 'present virtuous harmony between our husbands and wives of fashion', the houses of Parliament, and the Court and Country parties in the Commons. Such domestic and political harmony is owed to the influence everyone observes from the harmony of the different musical instruments in Heidegger's orchestra.

Philo-F—t saves for last the principal reason that induced him to appear as 'an advocate for Musick and musical entertainments', which is 'their tendency towards preserving our persons of rank and figure in health and vigour ... a consideration which should be ever uppermost in the breast of every good citizen'. He is certain it is agreed 'that our

Opera's and other polite *time-killing*, Musical Entertainments contribute more than the whole *Arcana* of physick [medicine], towards invigorating the constitutions of the more exalted and refined part of the community'.

His medical justification for opera is based on the uncontested principle that 'the functions of nature should be free and spontaneous'. Any suppression or interruption of such functions is dangerous, but 'no suppression impares it so much as that of wind'. Ill consequences of suppressing wind include 'cholicks, rumblings, belchings, swellings of the stomach and hystericks'. But in women, suppression of wind 'vents itself chiefly in noise and verbosity' — that is, in making them talkative. Moreover, the 'frequent intemperate fits of laughing and crying without any sensible cause, observable in such as are troubled with the vapours, are thought to be accountable to the suppression of interior wind'. The only known cure for such intemperance are 'Operas or the Cly—r [clyster]'.

Thus, the over-modest Heidegger could have promoted operas for their benefits to the nation's health:

... our ingenious *Advertiser* has contrived the only method that can be imagin'd for allowing nature her full freedom, and yet not offend openly against that injurious decency injoin'd by tyrannous custom. What can a poor Lady do to set nature at liberty, in the drawing room, at a visit, an auction, or indeed any where, except in her dressing room ... or at Church whilst the organs play... Now the *Opera* supplies all these defects, where during the space of three or four

hours, the imprison'd may be releas'd under the discharge of [orchestral] instruments without putting the pretty jaylor to the confusion of a blush.

Philo-F—t closes by anticipating the arrival in Britain of Amalie-Sophie Marianne Walmoden (variously spelled by contemporaries as Valmoute, Valmonte, or Valmouden), George II's fashionable Hanoverian mistress, the wife of his electoral chamberlain, and later Countess of Yarmouth. In the winter of 1736-7, Britain was indignant and scandalized at George's extended stay in Hanover to dally with Madame Walmoden.⁵ After Queen Caroline's death in November 1737, she was sent for and arrived in London on the evening of 12 June.⁶ Philo-F—t urges that:

... *Madame V*— be address'd upon her arival [sic] at *Greenwich*, to take upon her the high office of *Protectress General* of the F—ters of Great Britain, and that Mr. J. J. H—g—r and Mr. H—l do draw up and prepare the same, as greatly tending to the encouragement of *Operas*, and the conservation of his Majesty's liege subjects.

If I should find, Mr. Quibus, that your learn'd society approve of my justification of *Operas* and my animadversions [sic] on the benefits of F—ting, I may continue your Correspondent.

I am, Sir

Your most humble servant,

Philo-F—t.

Blowbladder-street,

June 10th.

The Grub-street Journal (of which the *Literary Courier* was a sequel) had always taken a dim and severe view of opera and other instances of the false

5 See Lord Egmont's diary, in Historical Manuscripts Commission, *Manuscripts of the Earl of Egmont. The Diary of Viscount Percival*, 3 vols. (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1920-23), ii. 304, 307, 310, 311; and John, Lord Hervey, *Some Materials Towards Memoirs of the Reign of King George II*, ed. Romney Sedgwick, 3 vols. (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1931), ii. 609-10. PhiloF—

t's previous exaggerated praise of Madame Walmoden ('a certain foreign celebrated *Toast* ... [who] is said to be as handsome as she is powerful and artful; besides she's of a country where the custom, I would recommend, is universally received') suggests that the office proposed for Madame Walmoden expresses anti-Hanoverian sentiment toward the King and his mistress. An

engraving from December 1738, 'Solomon in His Glory', showing King George and Madame Walmoden in a lascivious pose (British Museum, Department of Prints and Drawings, no. 2348) is reprinted in *Walpole and the Robinoocracy*, ed. Paul Langford (Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healy, 1986), plate 55.



taste of fashionable London society, and this letter continues this attitude. Philo-F—t's letter ostensibly began as sympathetic advice to the opera impresario John Jacob Heidegger. But as the letter developed, it is clear its writer's purpose was rather to apply some scatological humour to Heidegger and Handel as a means of continuing the decades-long tradition of satire of polite society's support of Italian opera.

Thomas McGeary

6 As widely reported in the daily papers: for example, the *London Evening-Post* (no. 1651, 13-15 June 1738), *London Daily Post*, and *General Advertiser* (no. 1131, 14 June 1738), and *The Daily Post* (no. 5853, 14 June 1738).

ORESTE AT THE LINBURY

The new Linbury Studio Theatre is incorporated in the rebuilt Royal Opera House. It is smaller and more intimate than the main house, certainly a lot less grand and, it has to be said, a lot less comfortable; but it was an ideal setting for its opening production (from 14 January), the first British performances of *Oreste* since the original run at the first Covent Garden Theatre in 1734. The work received its first modern production in Halle in 1985, when the *HHA* issued the first ever printed score, with performing materials, edited by the late Bernd Baselt; it was this material that was used at the Linbury.

Oreste is hardly mentioned in the Handel literature, because it is a pasticcio, made up of arias from several of the composer's other operas, adapted to a new libretto and with new recitatives. Pasticcios have usually had a bad press, for obvious reasons, but *Oreste* is remarkably effective and contains much excellent music. The libretto, omitted from Ellen Harris's edition of *The Librettos of Handel's Operas* (1989), is sensibly designed, and Richard Morrison's description of

it in *The Times* as 'a stock Italian-opera farrago' is not fair; it is derived from Euripides' *Iphigenia in Tauris* via a libretto by Barlocchi for Benedetto Micheli's *Oreste*, performed in Rome in 1723. The score is not quite a collection of Handel's greatest hits, but it has many superb numbers, such as 'Figlia mia, non pianger, no' from *Tamerlano* and the glorious duet 'Ah, mia cara' from *Floridante*. It was good to have a chance to hear it.

The most pleasing feature of the show was the production. In contrast with ENO's *Alcina* (see below), the words and music were allowed to do their work unencumbered by any kind of 'New Concept'. The singers performed with enough action to emphasize and illuminate the text without fussy business, distractions, or crowds of extras (except for three rather ineffectual Furies), and the whole thing flowed naturally, with few pauses. The title-role, originally written for the castrato Carestini, was admirably taken by Louise Winter, strongly supported by Jennifer Smith as Ifigenia and Lynda Russell as Ermione; Oreste's faithful friend Pilade was the tenor Joseph Cornwell, and the villainous Toante was splendidly hammed by the bass John Rath. The baroque costumes were gorgeous, and everything was brightly lit (if *Tauris* really was in the Crimea, as is generally assumed, blue skies and sun are in order).

The stage-set, a few Greek columns, was rather too simple, and I felt that some backcloths would have improved the visual dimension. The libretto does, after all, prescribe such scenes as 'a port of the sea with ships' and 'a royal garden with a door that leads to the sea'; it would have been nice to see them. At least what we had to look at was better than the ghastly abattoir used as the setting in the Halle production, complete with metal doors, blood-channels glowing red,

and the characters setting about each other with battle-axes at monotonously regular intervals (I kid you not). This being one of the operas of the mid-1730s, when Handel had a ballet company at his disposal, the dances were duly included, elegantly performed by the English Bach Festival Baroque Dancers. The Italian text was delivered with admirable clarity, but it is a pity that the Linbury does not run to surtitles.

That apart, the theatre seems ideal for Handel opera. The acoustic, though criticized by some as dry, struck me as excellent, and the small band in the pit (there isn't room for much more) was perfectly balanced with the voices. The English Bach Festival Baroque Orchestra played stylishly, and the performances were directed from a small Italian harpsichord which sounded well and was audible throughout. The conductors were alternately Howard Williams and Laurence Cummings. It is disappointing that some of the press reviews were so negative, for the last performance, which I attended, was sold out - even the chairman of the Handel Institute had to stand! - and was enthusiastically received by an audience that had derived much pleasure from the proceedings.

Terence Best

ALCINA AT THE ENO

English National Opera seems incapable of putting on a Handel opera without plastering it with gimmicks or appeals for cheap laughs or both. *Alcina*, which I saw on 25 January, was a sorry example. Buffoonery during the overture - members of the chorus doing comic turns with umbrellas under an imaginary storm - told us only too clearly what to expect (action during overtures has become a tiresome producers' fad; why not let us listen to the music?). David McVicar



apparently had so little confidence in the opera, or in the singers' capacity to hold attention, that he introduced all manner of extraneous activity calculated to draw attention away from the music, not least during arias. The fact that the score includes two ballet suites was made an excuse for constantly bringing on dancers or supers in unsuitable contexts, popping up from behind the scenery at several levels. One effect of all this clutter was to clog the progress of the action and make the opera, despite cuts, seem longer than it really is.

Alcina is a magic opera, but its supreme quality, marvellously realised in the music, is the profound humanity of the characters, whose contrasted embodiments of love are portrayed with great subtlety. Melisso, the least of them with only one aria, was made a king pin. The fact that he is described as Bradamante's and Ruggiero's tutor led McVicar to take an Oxbridge view of his profession and litter one side of the stage with piles of old books, which encroached still further in the last act. This pulled the whole opera out of shape, and so to some extent did the depiction of Morgana as a shameless tart with a kinky urge for cross-dressing. Handel took a sympathetic view of her character and gave her two serious arias of great beauty, one of which, 'Tornami a vagheggiar', her joyful response to the (mistaken) belief that the disguised Bradamante returns her love, was totally undermined by dancers doing physical jerks, imitating her gestures, behind her back. The dramatic irony went for nothing.

Even the magic was mismanaged, with no serious attempt at the transformation scenes. One of the opera's great moments, when Melisso recalls Ruggiero to his true nature and Alcina's magic realm changes to a horrid desert, was ludicrously represented by Melisso producing a few sparks from a portable generator. He

later used the Act III sinfonia to drive a group of dancers frantic by operating what looked like a kitchen mixer. At the climax of the opera Ruggiero smashed not Alcina's magic urn but a bust of Handel; if this symbolised anything, it could only be the producer's opinion of the opera or its composer.

The musical side of the performance was a different matter. Most of the singing was of the highest class. Sarah Connolly in particular not only sang Ruggiero's music with firm warm tone and dramatic conviction - she was very moving in the exquisite 'Mi lusinga' - but looked the part of the hero, both as lover and soldier. Janis Kelly was fatally handicapped by the production. She sang most of her part with feeling, especially in Act III, but could not project the full range of the character. In the early part of the opera, where she should dominate the stage and ravish both ear and eye, she was crowded out by all the business around her and treated almost as a clothes-horse at a fashion show with a new dress for every aria. One of her greatest scenes, her failed conjuration of the spirits at the end of Act II, was wrecked by a band of supers dragging on a harpsichord (what on earth for?) and striking attitudes round it. The whole point of this scene is that Alcina is quite alone, deserted even by her magic powers.

Lisa Milne's bright singing as Morgana suffered likewise from the vulgarisation of her part. Christine Rice was a reliable Bradamante. Gail Pearson scored a real hit as the boy Oberto, with exactly the right voice and demeanour. Toby Spence, got up like a punk as Oronte, looked as if he had strayed into the wrong opera. Noel Davies's conducting, generally brisk, tended to drag some of the slower arias; 'Verdi prati' is *Larghetto*, not *Largo*, Bradamante's 'All'alma fedel' a lively *Allegro*. Some of the vocal ornamentation

threatened to get out of hand and make for the stratosphere. Most of the *da capo* cuts followed Handel's revival, but it was a mistake to abbreviate the trio, a rare example in this idiom of a genuine dramatic ensemble. Michael Vale's spectacular set for Alcina's palace was worthy of a more stylish production.

The English Bach Festival's *Oreste* (see above) could scarcely have offered a greater contrast. Tom Hawkes's production was simple and straightforward, as were his sets consisting largely of eight movable columns, but it had the sovereign merit of making the action clear without distracting attention from the music. There may have been little for the eye, apart from some attractive dancing at the end of each Act, but there was plenty for the ear. Louise Winter sang splendidly as the eponymous hero, and Lynda Russell was scarcely less effective as Hermione, Orestes's wife in this version. Jennifer Smith made Iphigenia something of a senior citizen (one always thinks of her as young), but she was in control of the style. John Rath played the villainous Thoas like a bull in a china shop, but at least he was in character. This *Oreste* had two things in common with the ENO *Alcina*, sumptuous costumes and some fine singing. Otherwise there was no comparison. *Oreste* is a minor opera while *Alcina* is a major masterpiece, but on this occasion the former provided the more satisfying and enjoyable evening.

Winton Dean

For the diary

Steffani's *La libertà contenta* (Hanover, 1693) will be produced in the Barber Institute, University of Birmingham, on 8 and 10 November at 7.30 pm and on 12 November at 2.30 pm. Tickets: £15; £10 (concessions); £5 (students). Box office (from 4 September): telephone +44 (0)121 414 7333.



CARRY ON UP THE LANDESTHEATER

Handel's reasonably successful *Partenope* (1730) has received scant academic recognition, even though it has been staged a dozen times since its revival at Göttingen in 1935, David Daniels includes three of its arias on his recent CD *Sento Amor*, and a new production by Francisco Negrin is soon to be announced. This may be because at the climax of the plot the heroine Rosmira, who has been disguised as a man throughout, is commanded to bare her chest in order to fight a duel with her estranged lover Arsace. This lewd dénouement, combined with the opera's initially satirical treatment of the castrato hero, may also explain why *Partenope* had been rejected as a possible project by the Royal Academy in 1726 when, admittedly, it would have seemed out of place among such heroic works as *Alessandro* and *Admeto*.

Handel's decision to set *Partenope* once he was free of the Royal Academy is surely significant. The opera belongs to a small group of works that balance satire and humour within conventional *opera seria*, and it also mixes the tragedy of emotional turmoil with sexual comedy of various kinds. Instead of viewing *Partenope* as a curious prototype of *opera buffa*, we should perhaps recognize it as a portrayal of genuine passion occasionally refined by affectionate parody.

A new production was unveiled on 5 February at the Tiroler Landestheater in Innsbruck, and it offered much that was amusing and enjoyable. Nigel Lowery's production frequently had the audience giggling, there were some clever theatrical ploys, the stage was used creatively, and most of the plot was retained untwisted. Howard Arman coaxed good playing from the resident theatre orchestra, and the singing of the

two casts was generally impressive, especially that of Nicholas Hariades as Arsace and of Marie-Claude Chappuis and Anke Vondung as Armindo, despite the role being significantly reduced. Of the two *Partenopes* and Rosmiras, the better actresses sang less beautifully. The only notable vocal weakness was the local amateur who played Ormonte in the second cast; despite his inexperience, however, this brave choral singer entered into the spirit of things far more enthusiastically than his professional counterpart.

Although I enjoyed the show on a superficial level, from a scholarly point of view it was a travesty; after seeing a few performances I longed for something more realistic and psychologically penetrating. This *Partenope* attempted to impose calculated controversy but succeeded in reducing a fine opera to an entertaining vehicle for Nigel Lowery's sit-com ideas which, although funny, were often unfaithful to the libretto. Should the producer serve Handel or manipulate him? The latter approach, as demonstrated by this production, bequeathes regret that the composer's realization of an unusual libretto cannot be faithfully served: no amount of jokes or gimmicks can save the day. The Tiroler Landestheater evidently believed that a Handel opera, left alone and untinkered with, would be boring and alienate the audience. Those who take such decisions seem unaware that this approach is now deplored in every comparable art-form.

A few cuts were made to the score. Cutting may be necessary when the budget is tight, but it inevitably weakens the opera. Most of Armindo's and Emilio's arias were cut, thus removing their motivation and development. This was a pity, not least because *Partenope* is one of those operas in which every character makes a vital

contribution to the plot. The original libretto (Naples, 1699) was by Silvio Stampiglia, a founder member of the Arcadian Academy who knew exactly how to pace the growth of his characters. This feature is perfectly respected in Handel's score, and any omission damages the coherence of the work.

But the real disappointment of this production was the obstinate refusal to take the music or the libretto seriously. It is good to recognize that humour plays a part in *Partenope*, but the opera should not be made to resemble moments from Monty Python's Flying Circus or the 'Carry on' films. We had stage action that directly contradicted the words being sung, one-dimensional characters who looked as though they had been cut out of a comic and strayed into Handel by mistake, shuffling across the stage with goofy grins, opening and slamming of doors galore, excessive astonishment at entrances, a battle fought with stuffed toys on sticks, the Rosmira-Arsace duel as a game of table-tennis, and so on.

Such stock devices, intended maybe to complement the devices of *opera seria*, lessened the impact of the more valuable features of the work. A modern staging must avoid distorting any element of this 'comedy', which really deals with such serious issues as fidelity, self-identity, the ability to confront 'ghosts' from the past and make 'right' decisions about love and life. There were a few hints of tragedy toward the end of Act III, but they were not credible after so much daftness and came far too late for the audience to care much about the tension between the bewildered Arsace and the vengeful Rosmira. After all, how could these characters compare with a *Partenope* who rose through green smoke from a trap-door and wore vampire fangs?

David Vickers

The Handel Institute is a registered charity (no. 296615). Correspondence relating to the Newsletter should be sent to the editor, Professor Colin Timms, Department of Music, University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham, B15 2TT, England (email: C.R.Timms@bham.ac.uk). All other enquiries should be addressed to the Honorary Secretary, Dr Elizabeth Gibson, 15 Pyrland Road, Highbury, London, N5 2JB (email: gibsonsone@attmail.com).
